Transforming Relationship series
Sermon #1 – Paying Attention
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You can learn a lot from a goose.

Did you know that? I recently read an article about the migration patterns of geese. I know what you're thinking: "Wow, when's the movie coming out?" But it was actually very interesting. For example, do you know why they fly in a V pattern? It's because as each bird flaps its wings, it provides uplift for the bird immediately following it. By flying in this pattern, the whole flocks adds at least 71% greater flying range than if each bird flew on its own.

The article also said that when the lead goose gets tired, he rotates to the back of the V and another goose takes the point. The geese are constantly honking as a way of encouraging those up front to keep up their speed, just like when we honk our car horns, it's a sign of encouragement, as well.

Did you know that when a goose gets sick, or is wounded by a gun shot and falls out, two geese fall out of formation and follow him down to help protect him. They stay with the downed goose until he is able to fly or until he is dead; then they launch out to catch up with their group.

OK, what's with the "Animal Planet" episode? I think the behaviors of the geese teach us a very important lesson: we need each other for survival. A lone goose is a dead duck. Without each other, there's no one to provide uplift or a honk of encouragement, and no one to take the lead for awhile or to sit with you when you've been shot down. We need our relationships with each other to survive.

The irony is that we live in a world that discourages deep, authentic relationships. Our methods of communication are growing more numerous and less substantial. Our technological push for convenience and instantaneous results doesn't leave any time for actual relating to each other. We are less connected, even with those closest to us.

The other day my cellphone rang at home, so I answered it. It was my wife, calling me from the basement, reminding me to give Molly her medicine. Now, Leigh claims that she tried to holler up at me several times to get my attention, but if that were true, it wouldn't make my point in this sermon, now would it?

So that's the conundrum we face. We need relationships to survive, and yet we live in a world where making and nurturing those kinds of relationships is becoming increasing difficult. It takes time to do that, and the thing we seem to have less and less of is time. Painter Georgia O'Keefe once said, "Nobody sees a flower, really. It's so small, it takes time, and we don't have time. And to see takes time, like having a friend takes time."

With this sermon series on transforming relationships, I hope to encourage all of us to take the time to be good relational partners – spouses, family members, friends, co-workers, neighbors. We'll be looking at four characteristics of what makes a good relationship partner, and what we can do to incorporate that way of living and relating into our own lives. The underlying agenda for this idea is that the better we become at relating to each other, the better we'll become at relating to God, as well.

The first characteristic we're going to look at today is the quality of paying attention. Stacey Padrick, who wrote an article about attentiveness, defines "paying attention" as "being mentally, spiritually, and emotionally present with whomever we are physically present." It involves making sure that our focus is fully on the other person instead of giving into all the distractions around us.

That's hard to do, isn't it? I find it so easy to let my mind wander away when talking with someone - formulating what I'm going to say next, daydreaming about an experience I had, wondering if that's my cell phone I hear ringing and Leigh's calling me from the basement, thinking through the next task on my to-do list. It's tough being a mental multi-tasker!

You know, I don't get the impression Jesus had this problem. I have a feeling that the people speaking to Jesus had his full attention, and they felt it. The woman at the well, the Pharisees offering a challenge, the disciples yearning for guidance – Jesus stopped, he listened, he spent time with them, he gave them his full attention. And from the scripture I read today, he realized how hard that is for us to do.

Being able to do that is a precious gift. M. Scott Peck wrote in "The Road Less Traveled," "The principal form that the work of love takes is attention. When we love another we give him or her our attention." And yet, when our lives get busy, which is about every day, it's easy to take for granted the people who mean the most to us.

Mitch Albom, in his book "Tuesdays with Morrie," wrote about the relationship he had with Morrie, his former professor who was dying of Lou Gehrig's disease. Albom spend a lot of time in Morrie's presence, learning from the dying man about the true meaning of life. Albom wrote this about Morrie, and it's worth quoting at length. Listen to this, and imagine you were on the receiving end.

I came to love the way Morrie lit up when I entered the room. He did this for many people, I know, but it was his special talent to make each visitor feel that the smile was unique.

And it didn't stop with the greeting. When Morrie was with you, he was really with you. He looked you straight in the eye, and he listened to you as if you were the only person in the world. How much better would people get along if their first encounter of each day were like this – instead of a grumble from a waitress or bus driver or boss?

"I believe in being fully present," Morrie said. "That means you should be with the person you are with. When I'm talking to you now, Mitch, I try to keep focused only on what is going on between us. I am not thinking about something we said last week. I'm not thinking about what's coming up this Friday. I am talking to you. I am thinking about you."

I remembered how he used to teach this idea in the Group Process class back at Brandeis. I had scoffed back then, thinking this was hardly the lesson plan for a university course. Learning to pay attention? How important could that be? Now I know it is more important than almost everything they taught us in college.

Paying attention to one another is one of the greatest gifts we have to give. It means see the other person for who they are, not for what they can do for us. I know I struggle with this sometimes. When life gets busy, we slip into relating to those around us in a utilitarian mode. I start valuing others based on what they can offer or do for me instead of for who they are. My relationships become purely functional.

Paul writes in Galatians 5, “Serve one another in love.” He writes in Philippians 2, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.” In Romans 12 he writes, “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves.” The Bible makes it clear that our relationships are not there to serve us, but that we are in them to serve each other. Paying attention to one another is a form of service; it’s an act of love.

And what a gift it is - putting down our paper and turning toward our spouse or children when they ask a question, minimizing the computer screen when a friend calls, tuning out the distractions around us and focusing on the person in front of us. James talks about the importance of being quick to listen and slow to speak. There is so much need around us, but I believe the greatest need people have is a need to be heard, a need to be acknowledged and accepted and validated as a valuable human being

I’ve had many counseling sessions where the other person has been so grateful for all my help. And here’s the help I offered: “Um-hm. Hmm. Yes. Tell me more.” I didn’t do anything! I just listened. If we take the time to truly listen to someone else, we send them the message that they are important to us, that they matter to us, that nothing else is as important at that moment as giving them your full presence.

Paying attention can sometimes mean giving more of our time, but more often it simply means given more of ourselves. In our increasingly fragmented world, we have to be intentional about making sure the time we have together is quality time. That means putting down the remote to greet a loved one, or looking the cashier in the eye, or asking your friend a follow-up question when they share an experience.

Finally, our ultimate reason for paying attention to each other is that when we do so, we not only honor the person, but the image of God inside that person. Giving someone our attention says that we value them as a fellow human being. We might be surprised to find that when we pay attention to another, we catch a glimpse of God – and we become more attentive to Him, as well.